

News Clippings

September 24, 2008

Fire

Muncie

Thomas Apartments fire could be accidental

[Read the Article](#)

Flooding

Michigan City

City gives flood advice

[Read the Article](#)

South Bend

Flood disaster declared in 3 NW Indiana counties

[Read the Article](#)

Severe Weather

Indianapolis

Power restored to almost all of Indiana

[Read the Article](#)

Terre Haute

Floyd County Storm Victims Helped by Terre Haute Community

[Read the Article](#)

September 23, 2008

Thomas Apartments fire could be accidental

By RICK YENCER

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MUNCIE -- Fire investigators are trying to determine if the stubborn fire that destroyed the Thomas Apartments late Saturday was caused by burning a couch.

Officials were trying to confirm reports Monday that tenant Terry Dile fell asleep on the couch and awoke to find it on fire. That was just one of the reports made to emergency 911 dispatch Saturday night after the first fire call was reported at 7:19 p.m.

Dile, however, said he was unsure of what happened.

"I don't know," he said in an interview with The Star Press.

Muncie fire investigator David Miller said the start of the fire, which was still burning Monday, was probably accidental.

"That is what it appears at this point," said Miller.

Miller said Dile and other tenants on the second floor of the apartment building where the fire reportedly began had been interviewed, adding Dile was not being treated as a suspect.

Miller was again joined Monday by Rick Constable, an investigator for the Indiana Fire Marshal's office, along with federal Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agent Mike Vergon to look over scene and talk to witnesses.

One tenant who attended an assistance meeting at the local Red Cross office on Monday asked authorities what caused the fire. Constable said local authorities would decide the cause.

Two tenants who were saved by firefighters by ladder rescue Saturday night, John Frazier and Mark Brubaker, were thankful that rescuers acted quickly as the building burned around them.

"If it was not for (firefighters) I would be dead," said Brubaker, who said he just paid his rent a few days ago.

Brubaker, like most other tenants, lost everything from money to personal property, and most had no renters insurance.

Frazier publicly thanked firefighters, saying he was laying down and cooling off in front of a fan when he heard a loud "bang."

"I thought someone had set the dumpster on fire," said Frazier, who found his hallway full of smoke.

Both tenants were treated and released at Ball Memorial Hospital for smoke inhalation.

Property owners and fire officials confirmed Sunday that all 50 or so residents at the apartment were accounted for, and Fire Chief Eric Wilson reiterated that it was a miracle that no one died.

That's the good news. The bad news is that all the tenants must now find new homes. The building, valued at \$253,600 for property taxation this year, is a total loss and Wilson told tenants it was too dangerous to occupy.

"I don't think it is safe for anybody to enter," said Building Commissioner Jerry Friend, who took emergency action Monday to declare the building unsafe and was working with the property owners to demolish the outside walls.

Muncie Properties owner Scott Stonebraker said he would secure the property and work with the city to demolish it. He also said he would make other Muncie Properties apartments available to tenants.

"This is my livelihood, but you guys have lost your homes," Stonebraker told tenants.

Two Muncie fire companies remained on the scene Monday, continuing to spray water on hot spots. Wilson had been ready to pull the last crews off the scene Monday morning when more fire erupted in the debris under the building's rubber roof that collapsed along with the third floor into the burned out hull of the building. Firefighters could be deployed there for days as the site is secured and the building is torn down.

"No one can enter the building," said Miller.

Wilson said immediate plans include knocking down the outer walls to prevent their collapse.

Next-door buildings remain evacuated because of a 100-foot collapse zone around the perimeter of the apartment building.

Friend plans to take quick action in the coming days to demolish the building, given that it represents a public safety hazard to surrounding properties.

The building was over a century old and did not have a sprinkler system now required for apartment buildings.

Friend said the building, used as apartments for more than 80 years, was grandfathered before state building code began requiring sprinkler systems for apartments in 1993. Any major renovation also would have required sprinklers.

[Back to Fire](#)



THE NEWS-DISPATCH



Tuesday, September 23, 2008

City gives flood advice

From Staff Reports

Tuesday, September 23, 2008

MICHIGAN CITY - Mayor Chuck Oberlie and John W. Jones, director of Emergency Management, met with a representative of the Indiana Department of Homeland Security and the State Fire and Building Safety Administration last week as for a preliminary damage assessment.

Damage assessment field operatives from FEMA, the Indiana Department of Homeland Security and the Small Business Administration canvassed neighborhoods in the city to assess the extent of damage from the storm of Sept. 13 and 14.

Federal guidelines that determine eligibility include a threshold of 25 residences with 'major damage.' The definition of major damage is considered to be residences that have 40 percent or more uninsured or under-insured damage.

"Locally, we have taken more than 250 calls from the Michigan City area alone with reports of water in basements. The reports of damage are very concerning to us and we have been actively taking the reports and working with FEMA to get any relief that is available," said Jones.

"We are conducting regular meetings to organize local efforts to respond to public infrastructure problems affecting citizens while staying in close contact with federal and state officials capable of offering some help," Oberlie said.

Residents are encouraged to continue their clean-up efforts by pumping or wet vacuuming water from basements and following up with disinfection efforts.

Bobbi Petru, executive director of the La Porte County Chapter of the American Red Cross, said all wet items should be removed from basements.

"Wipe down any salvageable items with a 10 percent bleach solution consisting of one part bleach to nine parts water and throw out any items that cannot be cleaned," Petru said. "In many cases, carpets must be removed. Furniture and other salvageable items can be wiped down and dried in the sun. Wet masonry walls should also be wiped down and floors mopped with the bleach solution after water is removed. Dehumidifiers and fans are also useful in drying basements after water has been removed. Face masks and gloves should be worn and can be purchased locally."

Oberlie said residents should call the Refuse Department at 873-1530 for special trash pick up.

As information is obtained from state and federal officials, City Hall will disseminate instructions to the public.

"Citizens should monitor local media outlets for related developments," Oberlie said. "If we are successful

in obtaining a presidential disaster declaration for La Porte County, directions will follow for next steps needed for our citizens to file damage claims."

The state has set up a Web site at www.emergency.in.gov. Michigan City residents who have not filed a damage report with local Emergency Management should call 873-1499; La Porte County residents outside Michigan City can call (219) 326-6808, Ext. 2264.

Reports can also be filed online with the state by going to www.in.gov/dhs or by calling the Indiana State Faith Based Initiative at (888) 335-9490.

[Back to Flooding](#)

Flood disaster declared in 3 NW Indiana counties

Associated Press - September 24, 2008 5:54 AM ET

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) - Residents of 3 northwestern Indiana counties will be eligible for federal disaster assistance to repair damage caused by flooding earlier this month.

Governor Daniels says President Bush has declared Lake, Porter and LaPorte counties federal disaster areas.

That means homeowners, renters and businesses in the counties will be able to apply for grants and low-cost loans to help with flood cleanup and repairs.

State and federal officials will open disaster assistance centers in the counties on Thursday. Residents can also apply online.

The Indiana Department of Homeland Security says more than 1,000 homes in the area were damaged, and more than 300 had major damage or were destroyed.

On the Web: <http://www.fema.gov/assistance>

[Back to Flooding](#)

[<<Back](#)



Power restored to almost all of Indiana

Associated Press - September 23, 2008 5:34 PM ET

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) - The state's Department of Homeland Security says fewer than 100 utility customers in southern Indiana are still without power from last week's storms.

Department spokesman John Erickson says the outages as of Tuesday afternoon involved Duke Energy and Harrison County REMC customers. Duke reported 54 outages on its Web site as of 5 p.m., with the largest single block being 11 in Clark County.

Duke, the state's largest electric utility, reported more than 300,000 homes and businesses lost power in central and southern Indiana as high winds from the remnants of Hurricane Ike raked the state Sept. 14, 1 of its largest outages ever.

[Back to Severe Weather](#)

[<<Back](#)



Floyd County Storm Victims Helped by Terre Haute Community

Posted: Sep 22, 2008 06:02 PM EDT

TERRE HAUTE, Ind. (WTHI) - When storms rolled through southern Indiana last week, many folks were left in the dark.

So, in conjunction with the Indiana Department of Homeland Security and local churches across the community a food drive was held at Maryland Community Church in Terre Haute to help victims of the storm.

And today, that food was delivered to Floyd County.

"Floyd County was hit by those winds that were created by Hurricane Ike and they really got the brunt of the storm as it came into Indiana," said Beth Gaither of the Wabash Valley Disaster Recovery Coalition.

The food collected was transported to the Floyd County Salvation Army today and will be distributed from there.

[Click here](#) for more information on how to help the victims.

[Back to Severe Weather](#)